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EXPO STARS LEAGUE

Al Sadd face Muaiither, aim to get back to winning ways

THE WOLVES, WHO HAVE DRAWN THEIR LAST TWO MATCHES, ARE TOP OF THE TABLE WITH 37 POINTS

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd will look to go six points clear at the top when they host relegation-threatened Muaiither in the Expo Stars League at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today.

Sadd are the leaders with 37 points and are seeking to return to winning ways to distance themselves from other title contenders, including second-placed Al Gharafa with 34 points. Sadd have failed win their last two matches after drawing with Al Gharafa and Al Arabi.

Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizik said the match against Muaiither was an important one and the goal was to get back to winning ways. "I hope that the team's performance will be better against Muaiither than in the last match against Al Arabi. Every team is going through a lean patch and I hope that we will overcome it quickly, especially since everyone realises the degree of responsibility that they have – players and technical staff alike," Rizik said yesterday.

"A difficult match awaits us and three very important points that we seek to obtain, and our focus will be only on victory and thus returning to the path of victories. I am expecting a strong reaction from the players after scoring only two points in the last two matches, and this does not satisfy our ambition or the ambition of Al Sadd fans. We will be fully prepared for the next match against Muaiither. The character of our players will have a role in the match in order for us to make a strong comeback. We have players who are able to provide their best and maintain the top spot in the league," he added.

Sadd will be without some key players including – goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham, Mateus Uribe, Pedro Miguel and Guilherme Torres due to injury.

On the other hand, Muaiither enter the



Al Sadd's coach Wesam Rizik (left) and his Al Duhail counterpart Christophe Galtier at separate press conferences yesterday, on the eve of their team's Expo Stars League matches.



match in 11th and penultimate place and will be desperate to climb out of relegation place. Coach Jorge Da Silva said his team will go into a tough clash with positive attitude.

"Our focus is on our next difficult match against the leaders and one of the strongest teams in the league Al Sadd at their home and in front of their fans. We will give everything we have and enter the match with all seriousness and strength to achieve a positive result," he said.

"In such matches, we must play with extreme concentration and, most importantly, exploit all the opportunities that are available to us on the field. Such difficult matches are decided on small details and the players must take care of them. We will make every effort to present a special

match against Al Sadd and come out with a result that satisfies us all."

DUHAIL TO HOST SHAMAL

In another match, Al Duhail face Al Shamal at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. Shamal occupy ninth place in the table, while defending champions Duhail are seventh place with 19 points, only one point ahead of their rivals.

Al Shamal, under coach Poya Asbhagi, are looking forward to score their third victory in a row after winning the last two rounds over Umm Salal and Al Markhiya. "We achieved a valuable victory over Al Markhiya in our last match in the league, which was the second victory in a row, and now a very difficult match awaits us against a strong team," Asbhagi said yesterday.

"Al Duhail are the holders of the league title and regardless of their recent results, they remain a strong team full of prominent players with tremendous potential, so the game will be difficult for them and we must be adequately prepared for it. I hope we can put up a strong show, especially since we are looking forward to get more points in order to secure a good ranking in the league table away from the danger zone," he added.

As for Duhail, under French coach Christophe Galtier, they are in a difficult situation with their continued negative results and successive losses, the last of which was a 1-2 defeat at the hands of Al Wakrah.

Galtier said yesterday that individual mistakes has proved costly for Duhail. "It

is good for us to focus on our next competitors, but before that we must focus on ourselves above all and the way we perform on the field, especially avoiding mistakes that cost us a lot in this difficult situation that we are going through. For me, the players or the fans, we must remain fully focused to change the situation," the Frenchman said.

"The loss against Wakrah was painful for us, especially since the team succeeded in providing a good performance in the first half of the match and were the most dominating on the field. I spoke with the players after the recent loss and said that there are important things that we do on the field, and there are individual mistakes that are repeated in matches. We must be realistic and have full concentration."

SPOTLIGHT

QOC marks its 45th anniversary

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) yesterday celebrated its 45th anniversary. Established on March 14, 1979, QOC joined the International Olympic Committee in 1980 and became a member of the World Olympic Council of Asia in 1981. It also joined the Union of Arab National Olympic Committees in 1982.

Since its establishment, QOC has played a prominent role in spreading sports awareness in Qatar, nurturing and developing the Olympic movement following the foundations upon which the Olympic Charter is based, in addition to supporting and developing sports performance, which contributed to the great boom witnessed by the Qatari sports process during the past 45 years. The efforts of the QOC resulted in unprecedented sporting achievements at various levels, the most prominent of which was obtaining eight Olympic medals including two gold medals, two silver medals, and four bronze medals.

Mohamed Suleiman achieved the first Qatari Olympic medal by winning a bronze in the 1,500 meter race at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. The second medal came from Asaad Saeed Saif, who won a weightlifting bronze in the 105 kg category at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney.

At the London 2012 Olympics, Mutaz Barshim claimed the silver medal in high jump event while Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah took the bronze medal in skeet event. Then Barshim returned to win silver in the high jump at the Rio 2016 Olympics before Qatar succeeded in topping the overall standings of Arab countries in the last edition at the Tokyo 2020, with Barshim and weightlifter Fares Ibrahim winning two gold medals in addition to a bronze medal from the beach volleyball team.

The Qatari teams also achieved many other notable achievements in various regional, Asian, and global games. The sporting achievements achieved by Qatar continued to include hosting many major sporting events



that made Qatar a global capital of sports in line with the vision of the Qatar Olympic Committee 'let us be a pioneering nation that unites the world through sustainable sports development.'

One of the most important achievements accomplished by Qatar on the global level is its success in hosting the 1995 FIFA U-20 World Cup, even though the organisation of the tournament was assigned to it approximately two weeks before its scheduled date, so that Qatar proved to the world its ability to organise and host the most important sporting events, just as Qatar succeeded in 2006 in hosting the 15th Asian Games, where Qatar was the first Arab country to host this major sporting event, during which Doha achieved an unparalleled success that is still the talk of the Asian continent.

In the year 2022, Qatar dazzled the world by organising the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as the first country in the Arab world and the Middle East to win the honour of hosting this global event.

It succeeded in presenting an exceptional tournament that achieved success beyond expectations and that edition was the best in the

history of the World Cup. Qatar also impressed the world by organising the Men's Handball World Championship Qatar in 2015. Qatari team finished second to become the first Asian and Arab team to ascend the podium in the World Championship since its inception.

Qatar also hosted other global events, including the World Indoor Athletics Championships in 2010, the World Boxing Championships in 2015, the World Artistic Gymnastics Championships in 2018, the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) World Beach Games in 2019, and the World Athletics Championships in 2019 as well, in addition to the FIFA Club World Cup in 2019 and 2020, and the World Judo Championships in 2023, in addition to the 2024 World Aquatics Championships and other sporting events.

Qatar won the hosting rights for the 21st Asian Games in 2030 for the second time, having hosted the Games in 2006, in addition to hosting the 2027 Basketball World Cup, which will be held for the first time in the Middle East and North Africa.

Through its 2023-2030 strategy, the Qatar Olympic Committee is seeking to achieve three main goals: ensuring sporting excellence, promoting Olympic culture, and achieving comprehensive sports development. To achieve these goals, the Committee is keen to continue its support for the Olympic movement by encouraging all segments of society to participate in sport events and adopting healthy lifestyles. This approach extends to include building and developing elite teams of Qatari male and female players to ensure Qatari excellence in all sporting aspects, including training, management and other technical aspects.

The Qatar Olympic Committee is also seeking to keep pace with developments in the global sports system by organising many pioneering programs and initiatives at the level of the Middle East. The Committee also pays great attention to administrative and technical development.

QATAR'S DAWOUD QUALIFIES FOR PARIS OLYMPICS

Qatar's Ismail Dawoud yesterday qualified for the Paris Olympics 2024 after achieving the qualifying mark in the men's 400m hurdles. Dawoud clocked 48.69secs to claim gold in the ASA Athletics Grand Prix 1 held at the McArthur Stadium in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Le Roux Hamman of South Africa won silver in 49.75secs while his compatriot Johannes Pretorius got bronze with a time of 50.66secs.

FOCUS

Max Homa hoping grip change pays off

Reuters
Ponte Vedra Beach, California

After failing to finish inside the top 10 in each of his first five events of the 2024 season, Max Homa decided it was time to make some changes.

The West Coast wasn't all that kind to Homa last month, as he tied for 66th at the AT&T Pebble Beach (Calif.) Pro-Am before missing the cut at the Phoenix Open. He then finished tied for 16th at the Genesis Invitational in Pacific Palisades, Calif., prompting him to tweak his grip.

"Got my left hand stronger. I worked a bit more on my down-swing and my backswing and then did a bunch of just kind of discovery, self-discovery work mentally,"

Homa said ahead of this week's Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, California.

"I learned a lot on the Sunday of (Genesis) and just tried to – it was a really good momentum, good bit of momentum going into an off-season or a little break and then into this time of year."

Homa returned to action nearly a month later, landing in a tie for eighth at the Arnold Palmer Invitational this past weekend at Bay Hill Club and Lodge in Orlando, Fla.

Even though there was a bit of a learning curve with the new grip, Homa was pleased with how he adapted.

"As the week went on at Bay Hill, it felt better and better, all the other moves, and then I got out there Thursday, front nine, and my grip



Max Homa of the US plays his shot from the first tee during the first round of The Players Championship on the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. (AFP)

felt weird, and so that's just tournament golf for you," Homa said.

"It brought out the only thing I thought that I had kind of gotten

used to. It felt really odd, and it was a bit tough to trust.

"I thought I did a good job of trusting it and learning where it's going to bring my hands in the golf club. So, yeah, it can be tricky. I've had times where I felt like I needed to hit a thousand golf balls before it even felt normal. This one's a little different. It felt okay right away, just didn't translate to Thursday morning as nicely as I wanted it to."

During his hiatus, Homa also worked on adjusting his swing based on the type of club he is using.

"I've gone (in) ebbs and flows," Homa said. "I have a cut feel with – my driver always cuts, so I have a cut feel with that, and that is slightly different with the irons, especially if I'm trying to draw it, so I have a draw feel.

"But I think with the two weeks

at home and doing a little bit of extra work last week, I kind of found ... if I have this shot, I'm going to go to this feel. I have this shot, I'm going to go to that feel and work on that on the range so I feel comfy."

At last year's Players Championship, Homa tied for sixth, and he is looking forward to building on that performance.

"The energy of the event is always really cool," Homa said. "Really happy to get good weather. We've had some tough ones. Two years ago it was crazy, so it was cool to look at the forecast and see there's sun because the golf course deserves it.

"It's a massive challenge. I think pretty much anybody's golf game fits around here. You're going to have to prove a lot of great things, so I always love coming to this event."

GOLF

Li edges ahead of LIV golfers at Macau event

'I played really solid and left myself a lot of birdie chances'

AFP
Macau

China's Li Haotong birdied his final hole yesterday to card a seven-under par 63 and edge ahead of a packed leaderboard at the Asian Tour's International Series Macau.

Li, a multiple winner on the European Tour, had just one blemish, a bogey five at the 10th hole.

"I played really solid and left myself a lot of birdie chances," said Li, who once rose as high as world number 32, in 2018.

He has struggled since last winning at the BMW International in 2022 and admitted that the round had hugely exceeded his expectations.

"Not even close. I just tried to play steady so I'm really happy to have this score today," Li said.

One back on six-under par are LIV Golf League pair Pat Perez and Mito Pereira, plus Japan's Yuta Sugiyama, after they all shot 64 at the Macau Golf and Country Club's par-70 layout.

"It was nice, I hit it really good," said Perez after rolling in seven birdies against just one dropped shot, on the par-four eighth.

"Wind was blowing and there were some tight tee shots out there. I screwed up one hole, but other than that I played great," added the 48-year-old.

Pereira is playing his fourth week in a row, with two Asian Tour events on either side of LIV commitments, as the Chilean chases ranking points to secure one of his country's two spots in the Paris Olympics.

"To be honest, I'm really tired and ready to go home," said the 28-year-old Pereira, who cur-



Li Haotong of China playing a shot during round one at the International Series Macau at the Macau Golf and Country Club. (AFP).

rently sits 41st on the Olympic Golf Rankings with the top 60 qualifying for Paris. "This is the last push this week and I'm trying to really give my best."

Saudi-bankrolled LIV Golf has invested \$300mn in the Asian Tour – which unlike LIV receives world-ranking points – leading to the creation of the International Series of 10 enhanced prize money events. The series is making its debut in the southern Chinese resort city an hour's ferry ride from Hong Kong that boasts a glitzy

strip modelled on Las Vegas, complete with luxury hotels and casinos. Australia's Scott Hend was one of 11 players lying two behind Li after a five-under 65.

Hend, the Macau Open champion on the same course in 2013 and 2015, enjoyed one of the shots of the day to set up an eagle two on the 15th.

The 50-year-old smacked his drive over water almost stone dead on the 340-yard par four and rolled home a four-foot putt.

Also in the logjam at five-under

par was 2018 US Masters champion Patrick Reed, another who now plays on the controversial LIV Golf circuit.

But the 2017 Masters champion Sergio Garcia had a 72 with five bogeys and his fellow LIV-playing Spaniard Eugenio Chacarra carded a four-over 74.

Former US Ryder Cup player Anthony Kim also struggled to a 74 in only his seventh round of competitive golf since returning from a 12-year absence, and his first outside of LIV.

CRICKET

Ex-England paceman Gough steps down from top post at Yorkshire

AFP
London

Former England Test bowler Darren Gough has stepped down from his role as managing director of cricket at county club Yorkshire, it was announced yesterday.

Gough, 53, was appointed to the post in December 2021 following a racism scandal that shook the English game, which centred around the treatment of Pakistan-born bowler Azeem Rafiq at the club.

A statement from Yorkshire said Gough took on the role "following a very difficult period for the club and has gone on to shape a young and exciting squad".

Gough said in a statement: "It's been an absolute honour to work for my boyhood club over the last two seasons.

"Having stepped in at a very challenging time, we've worked hard to steady the ship and develop our cricket department to ensure we can return to the top tier of English cricket."

Gough, a right-arm strike bowler, played 58 Tests for England, taking 229 wickets, between 1994 and 2003.

Thirimanne hospitalised after car crash

Former Sri Lanka captain Lahiru Thirimanne has been hospitalised after the car he was travelling in was involved in a serious head-on collision near the north-central city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, yesterday morning, it was reported by www.espncricinfo.com.

The exact nature of Thirimanne's injury is not understood yet, but he is presently in stable condition at the Anuradhapura Teaching Hospital.

At least one other passenger from the car Thirimanne was in, is also receiving care at the same hospital, the report added.

Thirimanne is understood to have been on pilgrimage when the accident occurred. Essentially the car had crashed into a lorry travelling in the opposite direction.

Having made his international debut in 2010, Thirimanne played 44 Test matches, 127 ODIs and 26 T20Is. He was part of three T20 World Cup campaigns, including Sri Lanka's win in 2014, and played two ODI World Cups. He also led Sri Lanka in five ODIs. The last of his international appearances was in March 2022. He retired from international cricket in July 2023, calling time on a 13-year career.

SPOTLIGHT

Bangladesh to tour US ahead of T20 World Cup

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh will travel to the United States for the first bilateral T20 series between the two nations in May ahead of the 20-over World Cup, a statement said yesterday.

Houston will host the three-match competition from May 21-25 ahead of the World Cup, which the United States is jointly hosting with the West Indies.

"The Bangladesh team's upcoming tour of the USA marks a

historic occasion," Bangladesh Cricket Board chief executive officer Nizam Uddin Chowdhury said in a statement.

"We recognise the significance of this preparatory phase and are committed to making the most of this invaluable experience," he said.

Twenty teams are competing in the World Cup in June across four groups.

Bangladesh will play in Group D alongside Sri Lanka, South Africa, Nepal and the Netherlands.

Two teams from each group will qualify for the Super Eight phase.

NBA

Sacramento Kings hang on to beat LA Lakers despite huge effort by James

Reuters
New York

Harrison Barnes tied a season high with seven 3-pointers en route to a team-high 23 points, Domantas Sabonis put up a triple-double and the Sacramento Kings survived a late surge by LeBron James to beat the visiting Los Angeles Lakers 120-107 on Wednesday night.

All five Kings starters scored in double figures, including Sabonis, who had 17 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists for his NBA-leading 23rd triple-double.

Sacramento moved three games ahead of the Lakers in the Western Conference playoff race and also completed a 4-0 season-series sweep.

James finished with 18 points, nine in the fourth quarter, and led the Lakers with 13 rebounds, but missed a 111th career triple-double by one assist. Austin Reaves led the team with 28 points, hitting seven of his team's 14 3-pointers. Anthony Davis added 22 points and 10 rebounds.

Cavaliers 116, Pelicans 95

Darius Garland and Jarrett Allen had double-doubles and Cleveland caught fire from beyond the arc to cool off host New Orleans. Garland finished with 27 points and 11 assists and Allen finished with 17 points and 10 rebounds. Georges Niang scored 16 points, Sam Merrill had 15 and Donovan Mitchell, returning from a seven-game absence due to a knee injury, added 14, as did Damian Jones.

Zion Williamson scored 33 points, Brandon Ingram had 20 and Trey Murphy III added 11 to lead New Orleans, which saw its four-game winning streak end.

Magic 114, Nets 106

Paolo Banchero scored 21 points as Orlando bounced back from a pair of disappointing losses and recorded a wire-to-wire victory over visiting Brooklyn.

Bulls 132, Pacers 129 (OT)

DeMar DeRozan scored two of his season-high 46 points on an overtime-forcing jumper with 0.3 seconds left in regulation, and he added nine in the extra frame as Chicago knocked off Indiana in Indianapolis.



Sacramento Kings' Harrison Barnes defends against LA Lakers' LeBron James (23) during the fourth quarter of their NBA game at Golden 1 Centre. (USA TODAY Sports)

Nuggets 100, Heat 88

Michael Porter Jr. scored a game-high 25 points to lead visiting Denver past Miami.

Nikola Jokic, a two-time NBA MVP, posted 12 points, 14 rebounds and six as-

sists for the Nuggets, who have won four straight games and 10 of their past 11.

Hornets 110, Grizzlies 98

Miles Bridges poured in 27 points and rookie Vasilije Micic posted a career-best

25 points as Charlotte earned a rare road win at the expense of Memphis.

Mavericks 109, Warriors 99

Luka Dončić's run of seven straight games with a triple-double ended, but host Dallas turned to the shot-blocking of big men Daniel Gafford and Dereck Lively II to outlast short-handed Golden State.

Gafford and Lively combined for 22 points, 14 rebounds and nine blocks, allowing the Mavericks to win for just the second time this season when scoring fewer than 112 points. They also won their fourth straight overall.

Pistons 113, Raptors 104

Jalen Duren had 24 points and a career-high 23 rebounds to lead suddenly hot host Detroit past visiting Toronto. Duren recorded his third 20-20 game of the season while Cade Cunningham had 19 points and six assists for the Pistons, who are 3-1 four games into a six-game homestand after winning just nine of their first 61 games.

Trail Blazers 106, Hawks 102

Anfernee Simons recorded 36 points, eight assists and seven rebounds to help Portland beat visiting Atlanta.

TENNIS

Rune battles past Fritz to set up Medvedev clash

‘I’M A PLAYER THAT’S GOING TO ATTACK. I DON’T CARE WHO I PLAY, I’M GOING TO ATTACK ANYWAYS’



Holger Rune of Denmark returns a shot to Taylor Fritz of the US during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. **Right:** Daniil Medvedev of Russia hits a shot in his fourth-round match as he defeated Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria. (AFP/USA TODAY Sports)

Reuters
Indian Wells

Holger Rune rallied from a set down and saved a match point to defeat former champion Taylor Fritz 2-6 7-6 (2) 6-3 and reach the Indian Wells quarter-finals where he will meet fourth seed Daniil Medvedev.

Rune surrendered the opening set in 32 minutes and looked down for the count when 2022 winner Fritz went up 5-4 and 40-30 in the next, but the seventh-seeded Dane produced a vital hold before forcing a tiebreak.

The 20-year-old stepped up a gear to level the contest at one set all and broke his American opponent for the first time with some blistering shotmaking for a 3-1 lead in the decider.

With Fritz wilting in the California desert, Rune completed the comeback by closing out the match on serve, finishing with a fiery forehand winner.

“It was crazy. I really just stayed in the moment and kept fighting, trying to play better point to point and I managed to raise my level quite amazingly at the end of the second set, which meant everything for the match,” Rune said.

“He was controlling it in the first set and for a long time in the second as well, so I’m just happy I could keep fighting. I kept believ-

ing I was going to find my rhythm at some point. It was on the edge but I managed to find it, which was nice.”

Up next for Rune is last year’s runner-up Medvedev, who out-classed Grigor Dimitrov 6-4 6-4 with a near-flawless display to stay on course for his first title of the year after falling in the Australian Open final.

Rune, who split his two career meetings with the Russian last year, said he would come out all guns blazing.

“I’m a player that’s going to attack. I don’t care who I play, I’m going to attack anyways,” Rune said. “Against Daniil it’s a completely different match from today. The only similarity between him and Fritz have is the big serve. Fritz is close to the baseline while Medvedev is far.

“Medvedev on this surface is dangerous like Fritz. I’m just going to recover and believe in myself like I did today.”

Earlier, Casper Ruud ended Frenchman Gael Monfils’s run with a 3-6 7-6 (3) 6-4 victory and plays Tommy Paul after the American brought lucky loser Luca Nardi back down to Earth.

After struggling to put winners past the athletic Monfils in the first set, the Norwegian ninth seed became more aggressive in a tight second and rolled through the tiebreak. Ruud finally broke his 37-year-old opponent for a 3-1



Emma Navarro of the US serves against Aryna Sabalenka in their fourth-round match during the BNP Paribas Open. (AFP)

lead in the deciding set and cruised to the finish.

A nice moment came when Monfils walked to the service line trailing 3-5 in the third and the crowd rose to cheer on the fan favourite, who smiled and waved his racket in appreciation before holding serve.

After stunning his idol Novak Djokovic on Monday, 20-year-old Italian Nardi was served a dose of reality by Paul, who hit five aces

and never dropped serve en route to a 6-4 6-3 win.

Navarro stuns Sabalenka, Gauff cruises into quarters

American Emma Navarro stunned world number two Aryna Sabalenka 6-3 3-6 6-2 to record the biggest win of her career and reach the Indian Wells quarter-finals for the first time while Coco Gauff celebrated her birthday by advancing with ease.

Navarro absorbed Sabalenka’s powerful serve and converted four of her five break-point opportunities to beat the reigning two-time Australian Open champion in windy conditions.

Navarro came out flying to grab the first set before Sabalenka raised her level in the second to force a decider.

The even-keeled Navarro kept her cool, fending off a break point and smacking a forehand winner for a crucial service hold and a 4-1 lead.

Navarro, seeded 23rd, broke the hard-hitting Belarusian for a fourth time on match point to book a quarter-final clash with ninth seed Maria Sakkari of Greece.

Sakkari, the 2022 runner-up, beat Frenchwoman Diane Parry 6-2 3-6 6-3.

Navarro, who is known for keeping her emotions under wraps, did a subdued fist pump after winning the match in front of a supportive crowd at Stadium One.

“It’s a little bit unnatural for me to be in the spotlight and be playing on a court like that with a ton of fans and TVs and eyes on me. It’s not my natural way,” she told reporters.

“But I feel I’m definitely getting more comfortable with it and just feeling like I can be myself even if there’s however many people watching.

“Also I think that was my second or third fist pump ever. If it was a

little weird, cut me some slack,” she said with a smile.

With the win Navarro will break into the top 20 for the first time after the tournament and Sabalenka, who won her second Grand Slam crown in Melbourne Park in January, praised her opponent.

“Her potential is really great,” Sabalenka told reporters. I think she has the potential to be in the top 10.”

Gauff dominated Elise Mertens to win 6-0 6-2 on her 20th birthday and book her spot in the quarter-finals.

The dynamic American played her best tennis of the tournament so far, serving well and stepping into the court to overwhelm the Belgian 24th seed.

Mertens was unable to back up her win over Naomi Osaka in the previous round, hitting just four winners to 21 unforced errors in a match that lasted just over an hour.

Third seed Gauff saw her section of the draw open up after Sabalenka’s defeat and will play unseeded Yuan Yue of China, who fought back from a set and a break down to beat Russian 11th seed Daria Kasatkina 4-6 6-4 6-3.

Yuan, who claimed her first WTA title in Texas this month, stunned compatriot and Australian Open runner-up Zheng Qinwen in the second round and will look for another upset to extend her nine-match winning run.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Brazilian Football Confederation, SIGA sign co-operation agreement

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) and the Sport Integrity Global Alliance (SIGA), the world’s largest coalition in the field of Sport Integrity, formalised this afternoon in Rio de Janeiro, a decisive co-operation agreement for the integrity of Brazilian football.

With this historic agreement, CBF joins SIGA in placing Good Governance and Integrity at the top of their agenda, initiating a comprehensive and in-depth process of reforms aimed at enhancing the integrity, reputation, and credibility of football in Brazil, a country that has won the FIFA World Cup five times.

The partnership now established follows the close collaboration that SIGA has maintained for several years with various international and national sports organisations, such as UEFA, the European Rugby League, the European Aquatics (LEN), the International Chess Federation (FIDE), the São Paulo Football Federation (FPF), or the Portuguese Professional Football League (Liga Portugal), in addition to various leagues and national federations.

Signed by the leaders of both institutions, the agreement aims to address the urgent challenges faced by Brazilian football, promoting the modernisation of the sector, the qualification of its agents, and a culture of integrity at all levels, in accordance with SIGA’s Universal Standards.

Ednaldo Rodrigues, President



of CBF, highlighted the relevance of the agreement signed with SIGA: “We have established a very important partnership to fight against all types of criminality affecting football, such as match-fixing, money laundering, racism, and harassment. With solid expertise in all these topics, SIGA is the world’s largest institution in Sport Integrity. They operate independently, always ensuring that sport becomes cleaner and more transparent. That’s what CBF is pursuing too. SIGA will work with the Integrity Unit at CBF, which has been engaged with all the major institutions in the world.

“CBF’s tolerance for any type of criminal activities in soccer is zero. Our work will be based on this partnership, and we will keep doing what we have always done, also in conjunction with FIFA. As a

FIFA member, we will continue to fly this flag. Today we took a very important step, and it will not be the only one. We will share more relevant news and partnerships in the near future.”

Emanuel Macedo de Medeiros, Global CEO of SIGA and President and CEO of SIGA LATIN AMERICA, said: “Brazilian Football has a world-wide significance that nobody can deny. This significance is not unrelated to its five FIFA World Cup titles and the genius with which Pele, Garrincha, Zico, Sócrates, Ronaldo, and many others elevated football as an art. Brazilian football, however, can and should be more than its past glories. It can and must look to the future and realise its potential. To be modern, competitive, and sustainable. With a reformist vision, future strategy, and long-term objectives.”

PARIS 2024 HOPES TO BE MODEL FOR LOWER-CARBON OLYMPICS

Paris: This year’s Paris Olympics will use renewable energy, serve lots of vegetarian meals and heavily restrict plastic bottles, but can an event involving so much construction and international travel ever be environmentally sustainable? After an extravagant FIFA football World Cup in Qatar in 2022 that featured air-conditioned stadiums, the Paris Games are hoping to present a more sober model for global sports events.

“I hope Paris 2024’s efforts to reduce its impacts can demonstrate that it is possible to do things differently,” Georgina Grenon, director of environmental excellence for the organising committee, told AFP in a recent interview.

One of the main differences will be in the overall carbon emissions, with organisers aiming for half of the amount generated by the 2012 Olympics in London and the 2016 edition in Rio de Janeiro. Paris 2024 initially set a target equivalent to 1.58 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, but that ambition has been lowered to around 1.75 million tonnes. “Something we are uncertain of today is the (carbon impact of) spectators,” said Grenon when asked if the latest target can be met.

One of the key factors will be the number of heavily polluting plane journeys linked to the Games and “we haven’t yet sold all the tickets,” she added. An outside consulting firm will be tasked with auditing the impact of the travel, the construction, catering and sports equipment, with final figures set to be published in October.

Diesel savings

The key to reducing Paris’ carbon footprint was contained in the city’s original bid. Organisers promised to use either existing or temporary venues for 95 percent of the sports events, meaning they could avoid building new stadiums from scratch.

The only major new-build projects have been an aquatics centre, a mid-sized venue in Paris for the badminton and gymnastics, and the athletes’ village in the deprived Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis. Contractors for the village had to agree to reduce the emissions resulting from their buildings by 30 percent compared with standard constructions,



meaning many of them experimented with low-carbon concrete and wood. Other changes include connecting up all the sports venues to the electricity mains supply, meaning stadium operators don’t rely on diesel generators for power. “To give you an idea of the volume of diesel for the London Games, there were four million litres burned just for electricity purposes,” said Grenon. Elsewhere, Coca-Cola – a top Olympics sponsor – has agreed to install 700 newly designed drink fountains at Olympic venues, meaning that around 50 percent of soft drinks will be served without a plastic bottle.

Elsewhere, meals at sports venues will be 60 percent vegetarian. Recycling and re-use clauses were routinely written into equipment supplier contracts. All of the energy supplied to the Games by national energy group EDF will be from renewable sources.

Costs vs benefits

The Olympics have faced protests by environmental groups since the 1980s. Some oppose it outright, saying any social benefits are outweighed by the ecological costs, while others believe the concept simply needs to be re-thought. One group of researchers suggested in the Nature Sustainability journal in 2021 that the event should be scaled down, held in the same locations, and with far fewer international travellers.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Europe's heavyweights await quarter-final fate

Only three of last season's quarter-finalists have made it back to the last eight

AFP

Paris

Today's Champions League quarter-final draw is set to throw up a series of heavyweight ties after a mid-week in which penalty shoot-out drama really brought Europe's elite club competition to life.

Goalkeeper Jan Oblak's heroics in Atletico Madrid's shoot-out win over last season's runners-up Inter Milan on Wednesday – after the Spanish club came from behind in their last-16 tie – followed Arsenal's triumph on penalties against Porto a day earlier. Tuesday also saw Barcelona deliver a rousing performance to see off Napoli and make it through to the quarter-finals for the first time since their 8-2 annihilation at the hands of Bayern Munich in 2020 in Lisbon, at the height of the Covid crisis.

With record 14-time champions Real Madrid already having secured their last-eight berth, it means three Spanish clubs will be represented in the draw. They are joined by two English sides in Arsenal and holders Manchester City, as well as the German duo of Bayern and Borussia Dortmund, and French giants Paris Saint-Germain.

The surprise is that none of Italy's representatives reached the next stage, a year after Inter pushed City close in the final having eliminated neighbours AC Milan in the last four. Only three of last season's quarter-finalists – City, Real and Bayern – have made it back to the last eight this time, suggesting there is still a real degree of variety and unpredictability to the competition.

Yet the recent last-16 ties also more than hinted at the ever-growing polarisation at the very top of European football. FC Copenhagen could never really compete with Pep Guardiola's City, while getting the better of PSG proved a step too far for Real Sociedad and Bayern ultimately brushed aside Lazio despite losing the first leg away.

Only the mega-rich can now aspire to winning the Champions League, with four of the quarter-finalists posting revenue last season of over 800mn euros (\$874mn) according to this year's Deloitte Football



Atletico Madrid's players celebrate after their win over Inter Milan on penalties in the Champions League last 16 second leg match at the Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on Wednesday. (AFP)

Money League. Going by Deloitte's ranking, all eight quarter-finalists were in the top 15 clubs in the world last season in terms of income – Atletico had the lowest at just over 364 million euros.

Diego Simeone's side were the only team to win against a richer club in the last 16, and even then Inter generated only marginally more money last season.

The current format of the Champions League has been in place for two decades and will be changed for next season, when UEFA will revolutionise its flagship tournament by replacing the group stage with a league phase featuring 36 clubs, up from 32 now. Clubs will play eight games in the league phase, instead of six in the old group stage, all against different opponents in what is known as the "Swiss system".

It remains to be seen if that will somehow improve the Champions League, when the major issue appears to be that the number of candidates to win the trophy is getting narrower. Competing with City is not just an issue for Copenhagen, but for all clubs.

Having won the trophy for the first time last season, they are into the quarter-finals for the seventh year running. "It's quite impressive," admitted Guardiola last week. "We are well-respected from our opponents. The numbers are there – our consistency."

Whether anyone can prevent them retaining the title may in large part come down to the draw, with the path to the final being determined on Friday when the semi-final match-ups will also be decided. Winners in 2022, Madrid may be the best

equipped to beat City among all the sides left in the quarter-finals, but they were blown away by them in last season's semi-finals.

Bayern are into the quarter-finals for the 12th time in 13 years. They may be trailing behind Bayer Leverkusen in the Bundesliga, but they remain a formidable prospect in Europe. Three of the remaining contenders have never won the trophy, in Arsenal, Atletico and PSG, the French side reaching the final in 2020, when they lost to Bayern.

They are far from a complete team now, but will be eager to seize their last chance to win the Champions League before Kylian Mbappe departs. "I am not going to choose one team or give my preferences. What I am sure of though is that nobody will want to play PSG," said their coach Luis Enrique.

SPOTLIGHT

'No better feeling', says Sancho after firing Dortmund into last 8



AFP

Dortmund

Borussia Dortmund winger **Jadon Sancho** said there was "no better feeling" after his goal helped secure a 2-0 win over PSV Eindhoven and progress to the Champions League quarter-finals on Wednesday.

The Manchester United loanee opened the scoring in the third minute, his first goal in front of Dortmund's 82,000-strong home crowd since May 2021. Marco Reus added a goal in stoppage time to seal the win, putting Dortmund through 3-1 on ag-

gregate, making the last eight for the first time since 2021.

"It was like a relief. I think like all players you want to have a good start to the game – and there's no better feeling than that," Sancho said. "I'm just grateful that I could get a goal for the team. We knew it was going to be tough, but I felt we'd have the advantage because we're playing in front of our home fans."

Sancho, 23, had an unhappy time at Manchester United and had been forced to train away from the first team having fallen out of favour with coach Erik ten Hag. Having only made three appearances in the Premier League this season, the winger arrived

in Dortmund for his second spell at the club in January on a six-month loan.

He came into Wednesday's game saying he could "understand fans getting frustrated" with his output, but has now scored twice in two games. "I've always got a special place for Borussia Dortmund," Sancho said on Wednesday. "This is where I made my name. I have to be grateful to them and to my teammates for believing in me. I'm just happy we got the win today."

Dortmund coach Edin Terzic, who coached Sancho during the Englishman's first stint in Germany, praised the winger. "I'm happy for Jadon that he scored. He had a really great game," Terzic told reporters.

FOCUS

Branthwaite, Gordon get England chance ahead of Euros

AFP

London

Everton defender Jarrad Branthwaite and Newcastle winger Anthony Gordon received their first call-ups to the England squad yesterday for friendlies against Brazil and Belgium. Liverpool's Joe Gomez, Aston Villa defender Ezri Konsa and Brentford striker Ivan Toney also return to Gareth Southgate's squad with the chance to impress in the build-up to Euro 2024.

Toney is included at the first opportunity after serving an eight-month ban for breaching betting regulations but two regulars during Southgate's reign, Calvin Phillips and Raheem Sterling, were left out. Southgate revealed Arsenal defender Ben White has ruled himself out of contention for England.

White left the England squad midway through the 2022 World Cup for personal reasons and has not returned to the international fold. White's absence opens the door for Branthwaite, who has impressed despite Everton's struggles this season. Gordon is rewarded for his 10 goals for Newcastle this season, but faces stiff competition in the forward line to make it

to the Euros. England host Brazil on March 23 before facing Belgium three days later at Wembley in their final games before Southgate names his provisional squad for the tournament in Germany. Southgate's men were defeated finalists at the European Championship in 2021.

ENGLAND SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Sam Johnstone (Crystal Palace), Jordan Pickford (Everton), Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)
Defenders: Ben Chilwell (Chelsea), Lewis Dunk (Brighton), Ezri Konsa (Aston Villa), Jarrad Branthwaite (Everton), Joe Gomez (Liverpool), Harry Maguire (Manchester United), Kyle Walker, John Stones (both Manchester City)
Midfielders: Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid/ESP), Conor Gallagher (Chelsea), Jordan Henderson (Ajax/NED), Declan Rice (Arsenal), James Maddison (Tottenham)
Forwards: Jarrod Bowen (West Ham), Phil Foden (Manchester City), Harry Kane (Bayern Munich/GER), Marcus Rashford (Manchester United), Bukayo Saka (Arsenal), Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa), Ivan Toney (Brentford), Anthony Gordon (Newcastle), Cole Palmer (Chelsea)

FRENCH CUP

Mbappe on target as PSG reach semi-finals

AFP

Paris

Kylian Mbappe returned to the starting line-up and scored as Paris Saint-Germain beat Nice 3-1 in the quarter-finals of the French Cup on Wednesday. Having only been used as a substitute in last weekend's 2-2 draw with Reims in Ligue 1, Mbappe was recalled in one of six changes made by coach Luis Enrique.

He responded by opening the scoring in the 14th minute at the Parc des Princes, and Fabian Ruiz soon doubled the home side's lead. Gaetan Laborde pulled one back before the break for Nice, but Brazilian defender Lucas Beraldo's first PSG goal sealed the win on the hour mark. Ten points clear at the top of Ligue 1 and through to the Champions League quarter-finals, the result means PSG remain in with a chance of winning a clean sweep of honours this season.

The capital side, record 14-time winners of the French Cup, will now play Rennes at home in the semi-finals on April 3, with Lyon hosting second-tier Valenciennes in the other tie a day earlier. PSG have won the competition six times in the last decade but failed to do so in either of the last two years. This year's final will be played in Lille on May 25.

Mbappe has either started on the bench or been substituted in each of PSG's four Ligue 1 games since he informed the club of his intention to leave when his contract expires at the end of the season. However, he played a starring role as the Qatar-owned outfit beat Real Sociedad in the last 16 of the Champions League, and Luis Enrique has indicated he will also continue to field the France captain from the start in the domestic knockout competition.



Paris St Germain's Kylian Mbappe (right) vies for the ball with Nice's Dante during the French Cup quarter-final at the Parc des Princes in Paris on Wednesday. (Reuters)

Mbappe, wearing the captain's armband, got the breakthrough when he played a quick one-two with Ruiz in the box and poked the ball over the line for his 35th club goal of the season. Goncalo Ramos blazed a great chance over and Mbappe saw a deflected effort hit the post, before a goalkeeping error allowed the hosts to increase their advantage just after the half-hour mark.

Marcin Bulka, Nice's giant Polish shot-stopper, made a mess of dealing with a back-pass under pressure from Ousmane Dembele, who seized the ball and laid it back for Ruiz to score. Ineos-owned Nice are the only side to have beaten PSG domestically this season, having won 3-2 at the Parc des Princes in September.

Second in Ligue 1 at the season's halfway stage, their challenge at the top of the table has faded on a six-game winless run. They pulled a goal back on 37 minutes when Gaetan Laborde controlled and lashed in a rocket of a shot after a good run by Jeremie Boga.

Nevertheless, PSG effectively ended any prospect of a Nice comeback on the 60-minute mark when a Vitinha cross was headed in at the back post by Beraldo. The 20-year-old defender has quickly become a regular in the Paris side since arriving from Sao Paulo in January. Shortly after that, a Lee Kang-in free-kick was tipped onto the bar by Bulka, who needed lengthy treatment after taking a knee in the face from Ramos and being left with a bloodied nose.

Mbappe presence at Olympics 'very difficult', says Deschamps

Paris: France coach Didier Deschamps has cast doubt on Kylian Mbappe's chances of representing his country at this year's Paris Olympics, saying that it would be "very difficult" to compete at the Games straight after Euro 2024.

"It is very difficult from a psychological and physical viewpoint to take part in two competitions like that one after the other, in the summer, without having any holiday," Deschamps admitted yesterday.

The France coach confirmed that some members of his squad for the European Championship are likely to also feature in the Olympics squad, which will be named by Thierry Henry. However, Deschamps said the Euro "remains the priority" and that the identities of those players featuring at the Olympics would need to be known before the continental championship, which starts on June 14.

"We don't want any interference with our preparations, so once we are in our training camp at Clairefontaine, it needs to be clear who is going and who is not going," Deschamps said. It is understood that Paris Saint-Germain superstar Mbappe, the France captain, is very keen to represent his country at the Olympics, along with Atletico Madrid's Antoine Griezmann.

Yet the European Championship in Germany does not finish until July 14, with the Olympic football tournament beginning on July 24. That means there would be no time for a break in between, at least if France go deep into the Euro.

Men's football at the Summer Games is for players aged under 23, although three overage players can feature too, paving the way for the 25-year-old Mbappe and other senior French stars to take part.

However, football's world governing body FIFA does not oblige clubs to release players for the Olympics, which could complicate Mbappe's situation even more. The forward has already told PSG he plans to leave when his contract expires at the end of this season and Real Madrid is expected to be his next destination.

His new club is unlikely to be thrilled at the prospect of Mbappe going to the Games rather than taking a holiday ahead of the start of the new season – the final of the Olympic tournament is set for August 9.

France legend Henry is currently in charge of the national Under-21 side and will oversee the team at the Olympics. He accepts that whether Mbappe features in the squad does not ultimately come down to him.

"I have no certainties. I am at the mercy of a yes or a no from a club," Henry said yesterday. "And then if they agree and then change coach in the meantime, who is to say I would still have him?"